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ABSTRACT

The author, a colleague of Ivan Illich, suggests a radical alternative to the present school system--namely, educational accounts. The accounts could be restricted to use in schools while junior colleges retain their present role in the system, or they could be used without being restricted to schools and the junior colleges could be freed from their traditional role. As for accounts usable only in schools, one proposal would put all present school funds in the hands of parents, thus more nearly equalizing the resources of rich and poor and the competitive status of public and private schools, and giving parents far greater discretion in the content and timing of their children's schooling. If the accounts were not restricted to schools, the individual could buy any service or object the community considered educational. Of the funds allocated to each citizen (calculated at $150 per year or $17,000 per lifetime), junior colleges would probably attract a large proportion, especially if they truly fulfilled their community-service function of being a real educational resource center for all residents. The implications of these two alternatives to the present system of funding and function are discussed in detail. (HH)

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THE IMPACT OF EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTS ON JUNIOR COLLEGES

INTRODUCTION

Along with the May and June 1971 issues of the *Junior College Research Review*, this article presents alternatives to present patterns and structures in the junior college. Suggestions from seven other experts were published in the previous issues. Perhaps these eight ideas will spark our readers' imagination and inspire them to offer suggestions of their own. The *Review* staff would welcome subscribers' comments and additional alternatives.

Arthur M. Cohen
Director
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Let us consider alternative possibilities for educational accounts on the one hand, and junior colleges on the other, as either tied to or free from the current school system. Of the four possible logical combinations, only two are realistic: (1) educational accounts restricted to use in schools, while junior colleges retain their present role in the school system; (2) educational accounts not restricted to use in schools and junior colleges not restricted to their traditional role.

I. Educational Accounts Usable Only for Schools

Educational accounts usable only in schools, including junior colleges, is what we would have if the principles of the Jencks proposal were extended to the college level. This proposal, developed under the leadership of Christopher Jencks at the Harvard School of Education, is sponsored by funds from the United States Office of Economic Opportunity (the "poverty program").[1] It is endorsed, with qualifications, by Milton Friedman.[2] This proposal would put all funds now going directly into the support of schools into the hands of parents—who could spend it, however, only by sending their children to school. This plan would, to some degree, equalize the financial resources of rich and poor parents and would put private schools on an equal footing with public schools. Private schools and parents who prefer them would benefit most from this scheme, and schools with flexible curricula and grade standards would benefit almost as much. Public junior colleges—i.e., almost all junior colleges—would probably benefit more from the principles of the Jencks proposal than would four-year colleges and universities and probably more so than public high schools and grade schools. Parents in control of educational expenditures would be more lenient with younger adolescents reluctant to attend school and more inclined to let the older adolescents delay their baptism of military and economic fire by attending junior colleges.

A proliferation of private four-year colleges would provide the main competition for the junior college, but several major factors would favor the latter. First, most private colleges, although woefully short of funds, still have more money than they have ability to attract good faculty. Under the voucher plan, this problem

[1] *Professor Jencks and his associates have developed a number of specific voucher plans for trial in pilot situations. The above description combines some of the more highly publicized aspects of these plans.*

[2] *Economist at the University of Chicago, economic adviser to the Nixon administration, and one of the original proponents of the voucher system.*

would worsen for all except the small minority of colleges that specialize in snob appeal. Junior colleges also have a problem attracting first-class faculty, but it isn't as bad as that of the typical small private college. One advantage of the junior colleges is that they are essentially urban, while private colleges tend to be located in small towns. The advantage of urban location helps junior colleges to attract not only faculty but also students. In a schooled society, the trend toward cities and suburbs can only continue. Thus junior colleges should favor the Jencks plan for its immediate consequences. The risk it engenders is that parents, once they get nominal control of educational funds, will not be content with only the spending, but will demand actual control as well.

People have not demanded this control in the case of health services, but there are important differences between the two cases. Doctors and hospitals have succeeded in controlling the flow of public funds in support of health care even though the funds are channeled through the hands of clients. There has been little time for the clients of health care to declare their independence of the medical profession and little evidence that they will try. Medical practitioners have certain intrinsic advantages, however, over educators. The most important may be simply that sick people feel unusually dependent. Lawyers and priests also share this advantage with the medical profession: their clients often come to them in times of trouble.

Ignorance does not seem to induce humility except when the seeker of knowledge has immediate need of it—the traveler seeking direction, the boy who wants to learn to swim, the lost soul seeking a guru. These may be humble enough, but for the school system to adjust itself to the needs of such seekers after knowledge would imply a revolution far beyond anything contemplated here. The clients of the school system are seekers of social status and, as long as the schools can maintain control of that gateway, they have nothing to worry about. Just as the Roman Catholic Church lost effective control of the keys to heaven when it lost the power of the state, so the schools will lose their control of social status when they lose control of the purse. For schools have nothing of proven efficacy like smallpox vaccine, penicillin, or insulin, nor do they yet have the power, as do the courts, to use against the pleader who refuses the services of a lawyer. Civil service requirements for government jobs have nearly the force of law, and a socialist regime could perhaps depend on these to keep its school system in business even while putting educational funds in the hands of students and parents. The major appeal of educational accounts is not in socialist countries, however, and where there are private employers, the government can maintain arbitrary employment standards only at the risk of finding itself able to hire only the academic failures. Contrary to private enterprise propaganda, this is not now the case.

II. Educational Accounts Not Restricted to Schools

With junior colleges shifting from their traditional scholastic role to a more viable one under the new funding conditions, having educational accounts not restricted to schools is the more interesting and perhaps the more realistic alternative. At the moment, the Jencks proposal has more support but only because it promises to save the school system for a while longer. His proposal, however, still represents drastic intervention — much like removing the patient's heart and replacing it with a blood machine. This kind of intervention is not seriously considered unless the patient's heart is irreparable and the family wants to keep him alive while they seek a new one. Although interest in the Jencks proposal is an index of the condition of the schools, it will not really be tried. Supporters of the present school are more afraid of the treatment than of the disease, and they are probably right. Today's schools are doomed in any case, but they will probably fight harder and more effectively for themselves than the Jenckses and the Friedmans would fight for them.

What could the junior college do to save itself if public funds for education were funneled into individual accounts that their owners could spend for any legitimate educational purpose? Before an answer can be considered, both the qualifications of account holders and their rights to define education will have to be at least briefly specified.

Suppose that public funds for education in the United States were allocated equally among all citizens regardless of age, sex, or other characteristic. This would give each person $250 per year — $17,000 over an average lifetime.[3] Individuals could either accumulate credit in their personal accounts or borrow against the future, with certain safeguards. They could buy any object or service the community considered to be educational.

That junior colleges would have a strategic option under these circumstances is suggested by their most commonly used alternate name — that of community college. They could become the focus of organization of the educational resources of the community. They could have a real headstart over most competitors for this role if they acted fast. One of their greatest handicaps would be the illusion of some of them that they already are a true educational resource center in their communities.

Junior colleges are probably more democratic and suffer less from ossification than other older parts of the school system, but this is faint praise. They serve only a small part of the population, and what they define as education is referred to by most people only in passing profanity. Next to their illusions, the greatest handicap of junior colleges would be their present commitments — to students, faculty, facilities, and, above all, to certain fixed ideas about schooling. Legally these commitments would be liquidated by the shift of public funds to educational accounts, but whether habits of thought could be dissolved as speed-

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[3] *This is enough to buy everyone an average B.A. degree. The fact that so few now get it is evidence of the extremely biased distribution of public funds for education under the school system. Privileged students are heavily favored.*

ily would be the big question.

What would it mean to organize the educational resources of the community for the access of all its members? The following is obviously only one answer among many.

In my opinion, the first step would be to determine the true educational interests of community members. This cannot be done by asking people what they want. It cannot be done by asking experts what the people need. Neither knows. Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator noted for teaching peasants to read, is the man who has the best approach to such a task. He defines education as learning to know one's true situation in the world, in a manner that makes it possible to act effectively upon the situation, i.e., to change it in one's own interest. Education is usually defined in just the opposite way: teaching people what they need to know to fit into a pre-defined situation. Thomas Jefferson, Alfred North Whitehead, and John Dewey defined education as Freire does. Educational practitioners, following St. Ignatius of Loyola, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Horace Mann, usually define it in the second way.

Following Freire means defining educational resources in the broadest sense, and then giving individuals both maximum information about those resources and unrestricted access to them. Educational resources can be conveniently classified as things, skill models, peers, and educators. *Things* include records, devices to make and decode records, all kinds of equipment, and natural objects – everything except people. Everything is, of course, the same as nothing – unless properly classified for ready reference and organized for easy access, taking account of probable demand, availability, cost, etc. This is a matter of applying library principles – with one exception – to the whole world. The exception is that clients be given priority over objects, even at grave risk to future clients. Unless this risk is taken, most clients will get nothing. Since most things do not belong to colleges, it would be a problem to provide access to what they do not control; but if colleges worked effectively with what they *can* control, they would be able to mobilize enormous client pressure to increase their span of control.

Skill models include every member of the community able to demonstrate a skill that any other member might want to learn. Skill models must not be confused with teachers. The person who has just learned to read is likely to be the best skill model for someone who wants to learn. The skills to concentrate on, however, are not just literary or other scholastic skills but also those now largely neglected: learning to take a curve or shake one, to blow a blue note or fake one. Every legal skill should be registered and every potential learner given the widest conceivable choice of people willing to demonstrate the skill he wants to acquire.

Peers are simply fellow learners, people interested in acquiring or practicing the same skill or experience, at about the same level of learning. How important peers are is obvious in chess or tennis, but they are no less important in learning other things; it is merely more difficult to identify them. Players of competitive games will find their peers; others need help. They chiefly need the freedom to choose and the right information. Usually the best source of information will be other people also seeking peers. The organizing task in peer matching is principally one of removing barriers and providing facilities: computers, periodicals, bulletin-boards, meeting places, necessary equipment. As in the case of skill models, the important thing is not to neglect the already neglected: the peer seekers with esoteric interests and those with unattractive personalities are the ones who really need help.

Educators are the least important educational resource, but if they recognize this and subordinate themselves to the greater need for things, skill models, and peers, they can perform a number of useful and important functions. Besides organizing and providing the access outlined above – without intruding their judgment of what should be learned – they have, at least potentially, two other important roles. In a world where people are free to select what they want to learn, when, with what, with whom, and how, many people will need advice. Stripped of power to make decisions for their clients, educators cast in the mold of the old family doctor could provide useful services and could probably even do well for themselves in the process. Another educational function requires not professional educators but people with thorough knowledge of a specific field. To master the elements of a skill, an interested learner needs only a skill model. To master a field of knowledge, most learners need the help of someone who has attained mastery of it.

One virtue of classifying educational resources as they are here defined is that, in relation to any conceivable demand, none of these classes or resources is in basically short supply. They are presently made scarce by the artificial packaging that schools impose on them and they can be made scarce in other ways. Just as irrational client preferences, based on considerations irrelevant to learning objectives, can create an artificial shortage, so can bad geographic distribution or poor information or arbitrary rules and restrictions. The task of organizing educational resources is essentially the task of recognizing and overcoming such obstacles. For the present, there is no widespread incentive to do this. On the contrary, the current incentive structure encourages the scarcity and maldistribution of educational resources. Under an open system of educational accounts, the present incentive structure would in many respects be reversed. Under such a structure, junior colleges with enough flexibility could become true centers for facilitating access to educational resources, opening the way for all people to find what they need in order to learn. Recognition, in advance, of the fact that the possibilities exist may actually help to bring the new system into being.

Everett Reimer

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ARTHUR M. COHEN, *Principal Investigator and Director*

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